

Abe Shinzo on Japan's diplomacy during the seven years and eight months he was in office (Part II): Strategic Thinking within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

One of the key features of Abe Diplomacy is that it always perceived bilateral issues within their strategic constructs. China, South Korea, Russia and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific—surely this is putting into practice ideas that establish the reality of a diplomacy that takes a panoramic perspective of the world map.

Tanaka Akihiko, President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)



Prime Minister Abe speaks at the opening session of TICAD VI in Nairobi, Kenya, August 27, 2016.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Tanaka Akihiko: In the previous issue (*Gaiko* Vol. 64), we spoke in detail about the creation of the National Security Council (NSC), enacting the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and the Legislation for Peace and Security, and dealing with a series of important issues following the inauguration of your second administration, the underlying Japan-US and Japan-China relationships, as well as the issue of historical perceptions. This time, I would first of all like to ask about the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which your administration advocated. It is a diplomatic vision that has been passed on to the Suga administration. When did you start to focus on the Indo-Pacific?



Tanaka Akihiko, President of GRIPS

Abe Shinzo: It was during the Koizumi administration. I served in the Koizumi Cabinet as Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary (from April 2001 to September 2003) and Chief Cabinet Secretary (October 2005 to September 2006), so I saw first-hand how the then prime minister struggled with the relationships with China and Korea. The historical issues were thorny. Finding no way to break the deadlock, I began to think that it would be better to confront the situation with a broader outlook and to take a global perspective rather than being locked into bilateral relationships with China and Korea.

Then, in the process, I became deeply interested in India. I hardly need point out that India is a major South Asian power, the largest democracy in the world, and that it also enjoyed friendly relations with Japan. Of course, there are no historical issues. Thinking that India would be an important strategic partner for Japan, I started thinking about the possibility of hosting multiple conferences among the United States, Australia, India, and Japan.

India as a Strategic Partner

Tanaka: So, you were aware of India even before your first administration.

Abe: Yes, that's right. When I visited India in August 2007 during my first administration, I gave a speech entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas" at the Parliament of the Republic of India. Saying, "The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity," I called on then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to build a more strategic relationship with Japan. In fact, I think that the relationship between Japan and India has become quite close. However, with regard to the Japan-US-Australia-India framework, I felt that Prime Minister Singh was not that enthusiastic, so we tried to start at the administrative level. Shortly after, the Australian government changed from Prime Minister Howard to Prime Minister Rudd and in the United States, President Bush was replaced by President Obama. Subsequently, there was not much debate about a framework involving these four countries.

Another point is the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, the values-based diplomacy advocated by Foreign Minister Aso Taro during my first administration. Geographically, the Arc extends from Central Asia to the Baltic Sea, which is the area where it has its roots, and it also overlaps with the current Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China.

Tanaka: These ideas and diplomatic experiences are connected to the FOIP, aren't they?

Abe: As a preliminary step toward the FOIP, I published "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," a paper in English, in the International NPO Project Syndicate in December 2012, immediately after the inauguration of my second administration. The article stated that the four maritime democracies of Japan, USA (Hawaii), Australia, and India should work together to deliver the Rule of Law in the Indo-Pacific, and I tried once again to highlight the Japan-US-Australia-India framework. To further refine my ideas, I talked about the Free and Open Indo-Pacific at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) held in Kenya in August 2016.

Tanaka: How do you view subsequent developments?

Abe: The Trump Administration also started to emphasize the FOIP, and Australia and India were also positively inclined. The Japan-US-Australia-India framework now has some substance. In addition, in Europe, which is not in the Indo-Pacific region, the UK, France, and even Germany have now adopted an FOIP strategy. Surely, this is a framework for cooperation between willing nations that share common values. It is moving to see diplomatic initiatives advocated and led by Japan being shared with the world.

Tanaka: Critics say that the FOIP is a strategy to oppose the BRI.

Abe: The BRI should be judged on the merits of each specific project; it is not something to reject out of hand or, conversely, to wholeheartedly endorse. It is already clear that four conditions of cooperation must be met, namely debt sustainability in the target country through appropriate financing, and the openness, transparency and economic efficiency of projects. Based on these principles, we should coordinate with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other actors to actively cooperate on projects that can contribute to development in the region. In this regard, any criticism of FOIP as an anti-China cordon is off base.

At the same time, though, it is also evident that China is seeking to exert undue influence in the region through excessive loans, and to impose unilateral changes against a background of military force. In this regard, we must prevail on China to change its approach. I think it would be significant if FOIP could make a contribution here.

Expected Progress Failed to Materialize in Russia and North Korea

Tanaka: Generally, I think that the media has rated your diplomacy highly, but it has pointed out that among the foreign policy issues you focused on, little progress was made on the conclusion of a peace treaty with Russia and the North Korean abduction issue. First, I would like to ask you about Russia. What motivated you to tackle the conclusion of a peace treaty? I imagine the difficulties were well understood from the start ...

Abe: Concluding a peace treaty is the essence of the relationship between Japan and Russia, and the prerequisite is to find a solution to the Northern Territories issue. However, the Japan-Russia bilateral relationship was not the only context in which we tackled the issue. China was building its military power in East Asia and trying to unilaterally change the status quo in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, so the basic thinking was that in terms of strategy we must improve relations with Russia and not push Russia over to the Chinese side. This was a strategic view shared throughout my administration after comprehensive internal discussions, and not just my idea.

Tanaka: You met with President Putin many times and built a strong personal relationship, but even so, there was no progress. What was the stumbling block?

Abe: At the Sochi summit in 2016, the “approach based on new ideas” was declared, and at the Singapore summit in 2018, it was agreed to accelerate the Japan-Russia peace treaty negotiations based on the Japan-

Soviet Joint Declaration of 1956. We arrived at a point where we could finally negotiate the content, but things did not proceed as expected. There are many factors, but the backlash in Russia was extremely influential. In addition, the international environment and the depth of the mutual distrust between the United States and Russia had a significant impact on the progress.



Then Prime Minister Abe held a summit meeting with Russian President Putin in Singapore on November 14, 2018.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Tanaka: What are the prospects for the future?

Abe: President Putin referred to the Singapore agreement in a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Suga in September 2020. To that point, the Japanese side mentioned it first and then the Russian side confirmed it accordingly. I believe that Russia thinks that the change of Japanese prime minister must not destroy the friendly relations of the past.

Tanaka: Since the abduction issue is basically a matter of how North Korea operates, there didn't seem to be much the Japanese side could do to change the situation. What was the view of your administration?

Abe: We could not detect any decisive momentum. Kim Jong-il, the Chairman of the National Defence Commission, admitted the abductions and said that eight victims had died, but then he died in December 2011. As Chairman Kim Jong-un took power, I felt that there might be some change on the North Korean side, but nothing happened. In the Stockholm Agreement of May 2014, North Korea changed its position that the abduction issue had been resolved, and promised to establish a special investigative committee to conduct a comprehensive investigation of all Japanese missing persons, including victims of abduction, but

the promise was not kept. Of course, North Korea has subsequently been severely sanctioned by the international community, including Japan, because of its nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches.

Then there was the United States-North Korea Summit in Singapore in June 2018. We had insisted that the United States should keep pressuring North Korea, but when President Trump decided to conduct the talks, Japan needed to turn the occasion into an opportunity. We took the initiative and approached the US side and, as a result, President Trump brought up the issue of resolving the abduction issue directly with Chairman Kim Jong-un. I had hoped that the meeting would provide some clues as to how to solve the problem, but the US-North Korea negotiations themselves ended on a low note, so the situation did not change.

Development in Africa

Tanaka: As Prime Minister, you were very interested in Africa and you made many visits to African countries, including the TICAD in Kenya mentioned earlier. What was your thinking on African diplomacy?

Abe: African countries have shown great appreciation for Japan's development cooperation focused on ODA (Official Development Assistance). It is not only a matter of money. I believe there is appreciation of Japan's approach of working on development together with Africans rather than taking a top-down view. There is a strong sense of seriously considering the interests of the whole region among the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), the Senior Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, and in other settings. In recent years, China has attracted attention with major development cooperation, but I think that the way that Japan approaches assistance, which is quite different, has been fully assimilated.

African countries also say that they want to make ODA easier to use. There is still considerable improvement to be made, but Japan focuses on indicators that are significant in the medium to long term, such as debt sustainability and environmental considerations. This point has been explained, and I think our counterparts understand our approach.



Then Prime Minister Abe attended TICAD VI which was held in Africa for the first time.
Photo: Cabinet Public Relations Office

Tanaka: Efforts on the ground are a given to get people to understand the Japanese approach, but for the Japanese prime minister to go to Africa and to communicate the significance of Japan's international cooperation directly at a summit meeting is very effective. There are not many leaders even in the West who have met with leaders of the developing countries around the world as often as you did, and you were able to do this because of the length of your administration. I think that deepening the understanding of Japan in Africa is a huge positive aspect of Japanese diplomacy.

Abe: There are many countries in Africa and combined they have a considerable presence. European countries continue to take an interest in Africa based on the historical context, and China is an overwhelming economic power. How can Japan show its unique characteristics in this context? To reiterate, the high regard for Japan is a reflection of the dedication of our people working on development locally. It is vital that we continue to be involved in Africa in a way that is unique to Japan.

Translated from "Tokubetsu intabyu "Abe gaiko 7 nen 8 kagetsu wo kataru (II)" –Nihon Fukkatsu no Ishizue to natta Nichibeidomei Saikyoka (Special Interview "Abe Shinzo talks about Japan's diplomacy during the seven years and eight months he was in office (Part II): Strategic Thinking within the Free and Open Indo-Pacific)," Gaiko (Diplomacy), Vol. 65 Nov./Dec. 2020pp. 94-99. (Courtesy of Toshi Shuppan) [March 2021]

ABE Shinzo

Former Prime Minister of Japan

Born in 1954. Graduated from Seikei University. After working at Kobe Steel, Ltd., Abe Shinzo worked principally as a secretary to the Foreign Minister. As the candidate approved by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the former first district of Yamaguchi Prefecture, he won a seat in the House of Representatives for the first time in 1993 and later held seats in the Diet for nine consecutive elections. During that time, he was named Chief Cabinet Secretary in the Diet and Secretary-General of the LDP, among other posts. He was Prime Minister (from 2006 to 2007 and 2012 to 2020) for a total of 3,188 days, 2,822 of them consecutively, both the longest in the history of Japan's constitutional politics.

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Tanaka graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Graduate School of Political Science in 1981 (with a Ph.D.). He has served as a professor at the University of Tokyo and as an Executive Director and Vice President of that institution. He was previously President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) before taking up his current role in 2017. Since 2019 he has worked as the Editor-in-Chief of this publication. His published works include *Posuto kuraishisu no sekai* (The Post-Crisis World), *Ajia no naka no Nihon* (Japan in Asia: Post-Cold-War diplomacy) and *Atarashii chuusei* (The New Middle Ages: The World System in the 21st Century.).
